

In 1963, when Bob Dylan arrived at the Newport Folk Festival, he was an up-and-coming folksinger and songwriter whose songs were starting to be covered by a number of people. Important people too like Pete Seeger and the biggest folk group of the time, Peter, Paul & Mary who had a massive hit with Dylan's "Blowin' In The Wind" pretty much as Newport was happening. Three days later, when Dylan left the Newport Folk Festival, there was no doubt he was a star.

Things were a lot different back then. This music called folk was in a boom, partially due to an ABC television show called "Hootenanny." New folk groups were sprouting up left and right. Newport didn't have much to do with that as many of the founders of the festival couldn't appear on "Hootenanny" due to the blacklist, and many of the performers, Dylan included, boycotted "Hootenanny" in support of those blacklisted.

There were other folk festivals around the country, in Philadelphia, in Monterey, California, but Newport was the big one, the one that could make a career. At the first Newport festival in 1959, Joan Baez in an unscheduled guest appearance singing a duet with Bob Gibson quickly found herself courted by record companies. In those days, Newport covered the entire spectrum of folk music from "commercial" artists such as Peter, Paul & Mary to traditional singers such as Almeda Riddle. A festival would feature over 100 different artists and the lineups to say the least were incredible including blues legends such as Son House and Mississippi John Hurt to Bill Monroe or Flatt and Scruggs and what was termed at the time, the new breed of "city folksingers." Dylan wasn't the only singer from the Greenwich Village-based community of topical songwriters that year. Also appearing were Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton and Peter La Farge. But as the festival ended that year, Bob Dylan was the name on everyone's lips. He'd shared the microphone with both Seeger and Baez, and closed the festival in a grand finale of "Blowin' In The Wind" and "We Shall Overcome" linking hands with Baez, Seeger, Peter, Paul & Mary, the Freedom Singers and Theodore Bikel. He was the new radical folk hero following in the footsteps of Woody Guthrie and no one could touch him.

The following summer when Dylan returned to Newport, things had changed. His songs had been widely recorded, he'd graduated from performing in coffeehouses and clubs to concert stages, he was *the* star of the folk music world. And to the great disappointment of a certain contingent of the folk world, he was no longer writing outright protest or topical songs though he and Baez reprised their duet of "With God On Our Side." The songs Dylan sang that summer were from his forthcoming album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan* and along with one - according to *Sing Out!* magazine - his most requested song, "Mr. Tambourine Man," (which did not make the album) were of a more personal nature, dealing with one-on-one relationships. One could make a case that one of the songs, the

visionary "Chimes of Freedom" covered everything Dylan had tackled in his more topical songs in one swoop.

In the issue of *Sing Out!* (the folksong magazine) following Dylan's 1964 Newport appearance, editor Irwin Silber did an extraordinary thing based on what he saw Dylan sing at Newport. He wrote an "Open Letter To Bob Dylan" for all intents and purposes chastising him for abandoning the protest movement, saying "Your new songs seem to be all inner-directed now, inner-probing, self-conscious..."

When *Another Side of Bob Dylan* was released a few weeks later, the music revealed something else as well. Though Dylan was still playing solo on guitar, harp and for the first time piano, "It Ain't Me, Babe," "Spanish Harlem Incident" and "I Don't Believe You" pointed the direction towards rock and roll.

On his autumn tour of the U.S. Dylan showed little signs of abandoning topical songs. His shows began with "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and included "Hard Rain," "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," and "Talkin' World War III Blues" in addition to debuting such songs as "Gates Of Eden," "It's All Right Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" and "If You Gotta Go."

However that February, a different Bob Dylan appeared on Les Crane's late-night talk show on ABC. Gone was his standard concert clothing of suede jacket and jeans, replaced by a suit and Dylan sang two songs accompanied by Bruce Langhorne playing an acoustic guitar with a pick-up. Despite the acoustic guitar, "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" did not sound like folk music.

A couple of weeks later "Subterranean Homesick Blues" was released as a single and there was no longer any doubt - Dylan was backed by a full band. The flipside "She Belongs To Me" decidedly had a pop flavor to it. A few weeks after that, *Bringing It All Back Home* was released and from the red, white and blue cover which had more photos on the back than any previous Dylan album to music inside, the first side with a band, the second side, accompanied again by Langhorne (on two songs), it was obvious that big changes were afoot. The album was also accompanied by a much different publicity campaign than Dylan had received previously. Record store displays included cardboard stand-ups of Dylan holding a Fender Stratocaster wearing the suit and shades, and printed on them one of two slogans. "Bob Dylan Brings It All Back Home on Columbia Records," or "No one sings Dylan like Dylan." At the same time new Dylan songs by other artists, and not just folksingers, but rock and roll bands started pervading the radio airwaves and climbing up the pop charts, and this was followed by various people who either sounded like Dylan or wrote songs sounding like Dylan songs.

Following the release of *Bringing It All Back Home* Dylan toured England, playing solo as he always had. When the British music papers reached the United States, it was obvious that Bob Dylan was much more than a folk singer in England, he was a star, right up there with The Beatles and The Rolling Stones.

On July 20th, a new Dylan single was released. The sound of the band was harder and fuller than on *Bringing It All Back Home* and most noticeably there was an organ. "Like A Rolling Stone" received airplay on the major AM radio rock stations such as WABC in New York much faster than "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and quickly climbed the charts.

Four days later Bob Dylan returned to the Newport Folk Festival and playing solo, performed two songs at a contemporary songs workshop, "All I Really Want To Do" and "Mister Tambourine Man." The next afternoon Dylan, wearing an almost pop-art polka dot shirt did a sound check with members of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and organist Al Kooper.

That night at the evening concert, Dylan wearing a leather jacket and white shirt with snap-tab collar, launched into "Maggie's Farm" and in the three minutes it took to do the song changed music completely. Many in the crowd didn't like what they heard - whether it was the rock and roll band or the inadequate sound system remains a topic of debate - and booed. Dylan did two more songs, the early version of "It Takes A Lot To Laugh" (titled by some "Phantom Engineer") and his current single, "Like A Rolling Stone," and walked off the stage. Called back to the stage by Peter Yarrow and performing alone, he did "It's All Over Now Baby Blue" and "Mr. Tambourine Man."

Thirty-seven years later the controversy of what went on that night still rages with much revisionist history. Some newspaper articles claim that Alan Lomax got in a fistfight with Dylan's manager at the time Albert Grossman over it. They did have a fistfight, but it was over Lomax's introduction to the Paul Butterfield Band, not Dylan. The most legendary story is that Pete Seeger looked for an axe to cut the sound cable. According to Seeger in an interview published in *Gadfly* magazine, he said to the person doing the sound, "Clean up that sound so we can understand the words," and they shouted back, "No, this is the way they want it." I said, "Goddamn it, if I had an ax, I'd cut the cable." Not all that surprising since Seeger toyed with electric guitars in the forties and there were electric guitars on the albums The Weavers recorded for Decca Records, not to mention that various other performers including Howlin' Wolf and Johnny Cash had appeared at Newport with bands. Some writers now based on tapes of the show are trying to claim no one booed. However all press

accounts at the time as well as people I've spoken to who were there said there was booing and shouting.

Bob Dylan typically had little comment, though at a press conference later in the year in Berkley, California, he laughed it off by saying, "I did a very crazy thing."

The Newport incident extended to Dylan's next tour. At his next show at Forest Hills Stadium in New York, the audience was clearly divided with booing taking place during the entire electric set. At a show I saw in Newark, New Jersey that October there was no booing at all, but clearly by the time Dylan reached England the following spring, the folk versus rock argument had reached amazing proportions. Many of the reasons behind this can be found in C.P. Lee's book *Like The Night*.

Within two years of Newport, nearly every musician under the category of folk music had electric instruments on their album, including some who had accused Dylan of selling out. But the folk boom of the sixties for all intents and purposes was over. A year and a day after he shook Newport 1965, Dylan had a motorcycle accident. He would not tour again for eight years, but his next official appearance was on-stage with none other than Pete Seeger at the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert at Carnegie Hall in New York held on January 20th, 1968. Dylan performed three rocked-up Guthrie songs with a band called the Crackers (who would soon be known as The Band), the same band he toured with following Newport in '65 and '66. There were no boos, most of the audience was glad to know he was alive and well.

The Newport Folk Festival was cancelled in 1971 and resumed 15 years later in 1986. The notion of Dylan performing at Newport or any of the other folk festivals seemed a non-issue though he did attend the Mariposa Folk Festival where he had to be escorted off the island and made a secret visit to the Philadelphia Folk Festival in 1972.

During the next 30 years Dylan showed on record and in concert that he had never really abandoned folk music at all. *John Wesley Harding* was a return to an acoustic sound, *Self Portrait* included quite a few traditional songs, and many were included in the *Rolling Thunder Revue*.

And also over those 30 years, folk music and folk festivals changed. The new folksingers were by and large singer-songwriters and classified as folk simply because they used an acoustic guitar or if they didn't rock out too much. And where Newport was all-inclusive as far as music was concerned, soon the music was splintered again. Blues artists played blues festivals, bluegrass musicians played bluegrass festivals.

In 1988, Bob Dylan began what is generally referred to because of a magazine article, the Never Ending Tour. After years of experimenting with various styles, and various bands, and being backed by already existing bands, he put together a small four-piece band and simply went out and played, electric and acoustic, songs from throughout his career. One of the more interesting things about this tour was on every show he started including traditional folksongs. And as the tour went on, more and more of these songs kept appearing. In 1992 and 1993, he recorded two albums of essentially traditional ballads and blues *Good As I Been To You* and *World Gone Wrong*. And as he continued to tour more songs kept appeared often taking the opening spot, bluegrass songs, blues song, country songs, songs not always traditional by the strictest definition, but songs certainly from a tradition. And as these songs appeared, some of Dylan's fans would track down the source of these songs, and sometimes they would lead to musicians they didn't know about. Now Bob Dylan simply may have been doing songs that he liked to sing, but the end result was that he was exposing a large group of people to music they might not have bothered to explore otherwise from the reasonably well-known bluegrass group the Stanley Brothers to the country duo Johnny & Jack, to Elizabeth Cotton, the Mississippi Sheiks and many more. The irony is that this is what quite a few members of the original board of directors of the Newport Folk Festival had been attempting to do all along, and here was the all-time bad boy of Newport, the guy who dared to say, this rock and roll just might be folk music too turning more people onto Jimmie Rodgers, Leadbelly and the Carter Family than they ever could have imagined.

Flash forward to May 2002. Bob Dylan's tour schedule reveals he is playing Newport Rhode Island on August 2nd, and people quickly realize that is also when the Newport Folk Festival now under corporate sponsorship is taking place. If Bob Dylan acknowledged this at all, he did so in typical fashion on tour in England by opening a show soon after the official announcement with the first-ever acoustic version of "Maggie's Farm." The Newport schedule for the most part is loaded with singer-songwriters. Gone are the workshops on traditional songs, blues, and old-time music.

As the weekend approached, newspaper articles started appearing with every authority, would-be authority and non-authority - most of whom weren't even there - weighing in on what did or didn't go down at Newport in 1965.

Finally it's the day. The East Coast has been in a heat wave for weeks and even on the shore of Narragansett Bay it's so hot and humid that the slightest movement brings buckets of sweat. The festival along the sides of an old fort is packed. Walking in, the tiny "Roots Stage" is jammed in with the vendors, almost a souvenir stand, a bunch of singers with guitars sitting while one of them performs. There is barely room to stand and watch.

Thirty-nine years ago this would have been called "The Broadside Workshop" and I wonder if Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and Tom Paxton who were all making their Newport debuts had to perform under such circumstances, if we'd ever have known who they were. We make our way past all the vendors to wherever the main stage is. The lawn is a sea of people and blankets. Finally at some distant corner we spy just enough space to throw claim our territory. Someone's on stage, I don't know who. It's too hot to really care. There are too many people in too small a space. Checking out any other part of the festival means navigating a human traffic jam.

Shawn Colvin finishes her set and the banner that had been behind the performers all day is removed. The announcements reminding the audience to recycle are replaced with announcements not to photograph the next artist. The pre-show music heard at Dylan concerts surfaces almost inaudibly every now and then on the sound system. The scheduled time arrives and nothing happens. Roadies occasionally moving on the stage, followed by more announcements and more inaudible music. Suddenly, the music gets much louder and it's not the Newport Folk Festival anymore, it's a Bob Dylan concert. The band take their places and then he is on-stage. Binoculars go up. He's not wearing the jacket he usually wears in concert, but a white shirt and vest. But wait! Who is that guy under that cowboy hat? And what's that hair in a ponytail? That wasn't there last night in Worcester, and neither was what appears to be a pretty long beard. It sure sounds like Bob Dylan though, as he and the band launch into an old folk song, "I'm A Roving Gambler." As if the seas have parted, spaces appear in the crowd and we move up, and more spaces and we move up again. The next song starts and it turns into "The Times They Are A-Changin' " and finally we're close enough to see and the guy under the hat is some combination of pony-tailed rock and country star, Amish hillbilly, Orthodox something, and it's crazy and funny all at once, and the guy underneath the hat is playing it straight, acting like nothing different is going on, and the band is right there with him. And watching I can't help but remember the second time, I saw him, when he joked to the crowd about having his Bob Dylan mask on, and the white-faced mask (also under a hat) of Rolling Thunder, and all the other hats and masks before and since. But back to the stage and this is the master magician and the magic is in the music and they're deep into "Desolation Row," and the line about he was famous long ago for playing an electric violin, and the guy in the hat on-stage may be pretending he's someone else or somewhere else, but as usual the music speaks otherwise which is one of the tricks to this particular magic.

Then the electric guitars come out, but they've been coming out now for almost 40 years, and deep into the blues rock of "Down In The Flood," a song that maybe Robert Johnson could have sung followed by a stately "Positively 4th Street," a song that might have emerged from all that electric violin controversy, but this version is more sad than bitter, then wham, he's

into "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and this version is incendiary and he's nailing every word, the band tough, strong and menacing, and that feeling of menace stays around for "Cry A While" and nastiness of the words is in direct contrast to the late afternoon sun and the boats almost lounging in the bay.

Another change of guitars, and "Girl From The North Country" and then for the first time, a song from Newports past, "Mr. Tambourine Man," slower, sadder and then suddenly leaping forward with "Tangled Up In Blue." A brief pause for another change of guitars and as the sun is setting, they charge into "Summer Days" like there's no tomorrow and only the people in the special reserved seats are sitting down, everyone else is stomping on the blankets quilted across the field. And then the guy in the hat pulls out a real surprise, "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," and somewhere during one of the guitar breaks, the guy in the hat lets loose a broad smile, before getting back to business on "The Wicked Messenger" and closing things out with "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat."

After a short break, they returned with the mysterious lead singer, and charge hard into a song by another kind of folksinger, Buddy Holly and then it was hits time, with "Like A Rolling Stone," "Blowin' In The Wind" and "All Along The Watchtower."

And so, after all these years, Bob Dylan returned to the Newport Folk Festival. But there was no doubt that Newport itself had changed and if there were any old ghosts hanging around, they weren't going to be acknowledged. The guy underneath the hat may have looked a little strange, but in the end it was the music that mattered and just maybe that's what he's been trying to say all along.